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FRED CULP AND THE CROCKETT TRADITION¹

Marvin Downing, Ph.D.

This century, various Gibson County, Tennessee, individuals and institutions have kept alive the memory of David ("Davy") Crockett. The Daughters of the American Revolution memorialized Crockett in 1923 with a highway marker. In the 1930s Rutherford banker Fred P. Elrod purchased the remnants of the Crockett dwelling which Davy left behind when he moved to Texas. Elrod's dream of a cabin replica in Rutherford as a memorial to Crockett did not materialize until the mid-1950s when the David Crockett Memorial Association of Gibson County erected the structure. That building drive was spearheaded by former State Senator Broeck Cummings and Clyde Sharp along with other prominent association members including Elrod, Thomas Pate, Fred Baier, L.L. Harwell, Dan Brooks, and Hudson Gray. In the 1940s Oliver Gibbons, a public school history teacher and farmer west of Rutherford, began keeping up the grave of Davy's mother, collecting newspaper clippings about Crockett, and committing to memory stories about the frontiersman. During the 1950s, Mrs. Robert E. Ross of Trenton initiated efforts toward erecting a tombstone for Davy's mother's grave beside the Rutherford cabin. In 1950 Richard E. Davis, Editor of the Trenton *Herald-Register*, directed the acquisition of a Crockett bust on the Gibson County Courthouse lawn. The latest Rutherford commemoration of Crockett was begun in the fall of 1968 as David Crockett Day, an annual celebration held during the autumn.²

Another notable contributor to recording and preserving the memory of Davy Crockett in Gibson County is Frederick M. ("Fred") Culp. For many years he has been an outstanding, much-loved American History teacher at Peabody High School in Trenton. During these years he also has served as Gibson County historian. He and Mrs. Robert E. Ross have produced *Gibson County, Past and Present*, one of the finest West Tennessee county histories. That volume contains an entire chapter on Crockett and his background. The authors devote three pages to Crockett family genealogy presented in a Virginia newspaper in 1939, James A. Shackford's *David Crockett: The Man and the Legend*, and Mrs. J. Stewart and Zella Armstrong's *The Crockett Family and Connecting Lines*.³

Culp and Ross also include "David Crockett, the Six Crocketts: A Man of Multiple Identity," a chapter contributed by Mrs. Cecil Howse of Humboldt. Crockett is presented as a person of multifaceted abilities and activities. First, he was a superb bear hunter and unsurpassed rifleman, both skills necessary for wilderness and early settlement conditions. Second, the historical Crockett is characterized as a notable combatant in Texas and as an Indian scout of the Creek War. Third, the political Crockett served two terms in the Tennessee legislature—with a less than outstanding record—and three terms in the United States Congress. Although he was noted for his popularity, shrewdness, common sense and thorough independence, he compiled a lackluster record in Washington. Nevertheless, his backwoods ways and stories in the political arena earned him recognition as the "South's first Humorist." Fourth, of course, was the mythical Crockett, which is perhaps the identity most twentieth century Americans

are most familiar with. Here he appeared to be a "Superman," a doer of fantastic deeds, or in nineteenth century terms, a "ringedtailed roarer." Most heroes have gained legendary stature after their deaths, but Crockett was accorded that status during his lifetime. Fifth, was the musical Crockett. He loved not only the stately church hymns but square dances, too, at which he was favorite caller. Sixth, was the literary Crockett, a characterization which embraces writings attributed to him. However, "Davy Crockett's diary is a work primarily of folklore, not fact," Culp and Ross warn. Also in the House chapter is this poem.

HIS PARTING BLESSING

The Only Poem Composed by Davy Crockett

Farewell to the mountains whose mazes to me
Were more beautiful far than Eden could be;
No fruit was forbidden, but Nature had spread
Her bountiful board, and her children were fed.
The hills were our garner, our herds wildly grew,
I felt like a monarch, yet thought like a man,
As I thanked the Great Giver, and worshiped his plan.

The home I forsake where my offspring arose;
The graves I forsake where my children repose.
The home I redeemed from the savage and wild;
The home I have loved as a father his child;
The corn that I planted, the fields that I cleared,
The flocks that I raised, and the cabin I reared;
The wife of my bosom, Farewell to ye all!
In the land of the stranger I rise or I fall.

Farewell to my country! I fought for thee well,
When the savage rushed forth like the demons from hell.
In peace or in war I have stood by thy side,
My country, for thee I have lived, would have died!
But I am cast off, my career now is run
And I wander abroad like the prodigal son,
Where the wild savage roves, and the broad prairies spread
The fallen, despised, will again go ahead!

The two local historians insert into their chapter the titles of six biographies written in the 1940s and 1950s about Crockett. The reading level ranged from Walt Disney's lighthearted *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier* to James A. Shackford's scholarly and definitive *David Crockett*.⁴

In *Gibson County* Culp and Ross discuss the three markers in the county to Crockett's family. First, over twenty years before the Culp-Ross publication, Trenton's Elizabeth Marshall Martin Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution sought to honor Crockett for the role he had played in marking roads during Gibson County's early history. The group located the highest point along Highway 45W and placed their marker there, approximately two miles south of the county seat. Next, Samuel Cole

Williams, a Gibson County native who had become an eminent Tennessee judge and historian, originated the idea of a bronze Crockett bust on the Gibson County Courthouse lawn. Gibson Countians, led particularly by Davis and the Trenton Rotary Club, raised funds locally. On October 13, 1950, Tennesseans, Texans, and representatives of the Tennessee Historical Commission dedicated the monument. Third, Cummings and the Rutherford Lions Club, headed by Quintin Atchison, then Rutherford City Schools Superintendent, were responsible for duplication of Crockett's log cabin, which originally was near the town. The cabin dedication on the school grounds was attended by prominent local and state personages, among them Governor Frank Clement. The occasion was to celebrate "The life of the United States' most colorful Congressman of all times."⁵

A decade later Culp began a newspaper series in the Trenton *Herald-Register* at the request of the editor. His column "Looking Back, Fred M. Culp, Gibson County Historian, R#1, Trenton," ran weekly August through December, 1967. After the newspaper changed ownership, Culp did not ask to continue the feature. Five of his articles in the series focused on Crockett or his family.⁶

Culp's first article appeared August 16, 1967, the day before the 181st anniversary of Crockett's birth. Nationally the U.S. Post Office was scheduled to release at San Antonio, Texas, a five-cent stamp in the American Folklore series depicting Davy Crockett,⁷ so Culp considered it natural for Gibson County to remember Crockett's activities in West Tennessee. Culp acknowledged what was also evident to Crockett's contemporaries: the difficulty of accurately evaluating a person who is a legend. The historian supported his point with a May 28, 1931, newspaper report from the *Southern Statesman* of nearby Jackson, Tennessee, a story which the *Florence (Alabama) Gazette* had originally printed: A man who had recently been in West Tennessee indicated Crockett was fatally shot during a campaign speech. The Alabama newspaper considered the information a rumor, a fact partly reflected in the outline, "Reported Death of David Crockett." The Florence editor focused on a problem in interpretation which Culp recognized: "The foregoing is one among many evidences of exaggeration in regard to every incident which relates to Col. Crockett. Some have him wading the Mississippi, with a steamboat upon his back, others whipping his weight in wild cats, and a panther thrown in." Thus, the Alabama journalist regarded the news of Crockett's death as untrue.

Culp tries to locate Crockett's residences in general. In part he does not pinpoint the places because Crockett's name could be found in the County Court Minutes and Warranty Deed Records of Carroll, Weakley, and Gibson Counties. That distribution was partially explained by his residences being near the common line between Gibson and Weakley Counties. Further, the house from which he departed for Texas in 1835 was in Weakley County, but in 1837 that part of Weakley County below the South Fork of the Obion River was transferred to Gibson County. Additionally, Gibson County did not exist when Davy first came to the Western District, so he recorded his deed in Carroll County, where the land was located. However, Crockett had a hand in Gibson County's coming into being. First, he signed the citizens' request to create Gibson County, and as a Tennessee legislator he sponsored the bill for creating Gibson County. According to Culp, Crockett was a Gibson County resident until after he became a U.S. Congressman, whereupon he became a Weakley County resident.⁸

Culp chose to include in the first of his series of newspaper articles a brief listing of Crockett's immediate family members. Crockett's first wife, Polly Finley, bore three children: John Wesley, William, and Margaret, who became Mrs. Wylie Flowers. Crockett's second marriage to Elizabeth Patton produced what he considered his "second crop children." They were Robert P., who migrated to Texas and lived to be seventy years old; Elvira C. Wilson, who also died in Texas; and Matilda C. Tyson Wilson Fields, who died near Trenton.⁹

Culp's next column on Crockett dealt with Smith Rudd of Bronson, Michigan, who in the 1880s was actively interested in David Crockett. Apparently Rudd inquired in the *Detroit-Free-Press* whether a portrait of, or monument to, Davy existed. Those inquiries brought him into correspondence with Davy's grandson, Colonel R.H. Crockett of Texas, and eventually a personal visit with the Colonel.¹⁰

Prior to that meeting, Rudd was in West Tennessee. In Gibson County Rudd stopped at Crockett's original dwelling situated near a creek flowing into the Obion River. Rudd considered the cabin to have been "a very stylish house in its day" and still structurally sound, in his opinion. Like other visitors, Rudd examined the beech tree into whose bark Davy had carved his initials and a deer carving that Davy made in another tree.

Rudd also met Crockett relatives there. He was greatly impressed by the physical attractiveness and the character of Matilda Crockett Fields, who at approximately sixty years old was Davy's only surviving daughter. She had been in her mid-teens when Davy started his trip to Texas.

In this Gibson County vicinity Rudd probably talked with Mrs. Martha Flowers Glisson,¹¹ Davy's granddaughter who was the daughter of Margaret Crockett Flowers and Wiley Flowers. Mrs. Glisson, one of thirteen sons and daughters, knew that in Crockett's day Wiley Flowers wrote for Davy's permission to marry Margaret only to receive the terse response, "Yours received, go ahead." Mrs. Glisson possessed the last letter her grandfather had written the family from Texas, a letter Rudd judged to be "of excellent penmanship, spelling, and composition."¹²

Rudd conversed with men who claimed to have hunted with Crockett. Naturally he heard hunting stories and tales of Davy's marksmanship. One person claimed to have outshot Crockett in a target shoot for possession of an animal prize. Rudd downgraded the stated outcome because the many intervening years had likely influenced the teller's judgment and because Davy had disagreed at the time. So Rudd simply decided upon an equal division of the game.

Rudd moved on a few miles to Crockett's last log cabin dwelling, the residence the frontiersman left when he went to Texas. Someone else besides Davy had lived in the house which, according to Rudd, had been relocated from its original site at one time.¹³ Culp indicated that it was this cabin which was replicated at Rutherford. The Michigan man continued that he ate apples from trees Davy was credited with planting. Rudd said that "Nearby I...saw a red earthenware on which his (Davy's) bear and venison

steaks were served over fifty years ago," but it was unclear whether he meant at this site or at a Crockett descendant's house, the latter being more likely.

After Rudd had visited Crockett's descendants and Crockett-related places in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas, he remarked that the Volunteer State had not erected memorials to Davy. He earnestly hoped Tennessee would build an appropriate monument to Crockett.

Culp notes that special Crockett honors have been held throughout Tennessee in the twentieth century and that three memorials are located in Gibson County: the marker on Highway 45W, the bronze bust on the Courthouse lawn, and the Rutherford cabin.¹⁴

As a result of his research, Fred Culp has been a personal participant in keeping alive the Crockett tradition in Gibson County, Tennessee. His look into old newspapers has brought to public attention information which area citizens would probably have missed otherwise. His writings have contributed glimpses into the difficulties of interpreting the historical as opposed to the legendary Crockett. Culp's enthusiasm for history is evident in his admonition to me: "Good luck with old Davy!"

1. This research was begun under a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to the University of Tennessee at Martin, a grant which fellow UTM History colleague Charles F. Ogilvie directed. The author especially thanks Fred Culp for sharing information and materials with him.
2. Marvin Downing, "Davy Crockett in Northwest Tennessee," in Neil Graves, editor, **River Region Monographs: Reports on People and Culture** (Martin: The University of Tennessee at Martin, 1975), pp.7-16; hereafter cited as Downing, "Crockett;" Marvin Downing, "Memorial Remembrances of David (Davy) Crockett in Rutherford," unpublished manuscript in the author's possession; Marvin Downing, "Davy Crockett in Gibson County, Tennessee: A Century of Memories," unpublished manuscript in the author's possession; Oliver Gibbons to Marvin Downing, February 16, 1979, letter in Downing's possession. (For additional information about Davis, see Marvin Downing, "Richard E. Davis and Crockett Campaign Stories," this *Journal*, IX, June, 1981, 59-64, and Marvin Downing, "Memorial Tributes to David (Davy) Crockett in Trenton," **West Tennessee Historical Society Papers**, XXXIII, 1979, 81-94. This latter publication includes five pictures related to Crockett. See also Trenton **Herald Gazette**, February 5, 1970.) One of Gibbons' newspaper clippings concerned an infamous nephew or grandson of Davy Crockett in New Mexico. This Davy Crockett went further west than Davy had at the Alamo. During the 1870s the lesser known Crockett amused himself by riding a horse into saloons and shooting out windows in Cimarron, New Mexico. In one saloon visit Davy enlivened the scene by putting bullet holes through hats the patrons were wearing. He also displayed a sadistic bent on other occasions. Several times he forced the Cimarron sheriff to drink liquor until the lawman lost consciousness. The rogue further disliked Union soldiers and showed his prejudice by shooting four troopers without provocation. Prior to that incident he remained unchallenged chiefly because law officers did not attempt to outlaw him. After shooting the soldiers, at least one of whom died, he went into hiding for a while. Upon hearing the sheriff was seeking to arrest him, Crockett "rode boldly into Cimarron shouting his defiance." The sheriff and two deputies were ready for the outlaw's arrival. At the appropriate moment a deputy came out of hiding with a double-barreled shotgun aimed at the fugitive. Still defiant, Crockett mockingly taunted the lawman, "Go ahead and shoot. I dare you!" The deputy dared, fired, and the dead man was buried the next day. (Undated newspaper clipping in the possession of Oliver Gibbons; hereafter cited as the Gibbons papers.)
3. Frederick M. Culp and Mrs. Robert E. Ross, **Gibson County, Past and Present** (Trenton: Gibson County Historical Society, 1961), pp.19-25; hereafter cited as Culp and Ross, **Gibson County**; James A. Shackford, **David Crockett; The Man and the Legend** (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956), pp.5, 6, 15, 16, and 293; hereafter cited as Shackford, **David Crockett**; and Janie Preston, Collup French (Mrs. J. Stewart French) and Zella Armstrong, **The Crockett Family and Connecting Line** (Bristol, Tennessee: King Print Company, 1928). This volume was reprinted in 1974 by The Reprint Company of Spartanburg, South Carolina. (Hereafter cited as French and Armstrong, **Crockett Family**.)
4. Later Culp commented "I thought that the (Howse) article was an original when we used it in the Gibson County book. However, after reading James A. Shackford and the reference to the Blair article I believe it was copied." The article referred to was by Walter Blair, "Six Davy Crocketts," **Southwest Review**, XXV, July, 1940, pp. 443-62; Shackford, **Crockett**, pp. 245 and 321; and Culp to Downing, February 22, 1979, letter in Downing's possession.

5. Culp and Ross, **Gibson County**, 19. Culp and Ross credited Cummings and the Rutherford Lions Club with building the replica, and correctly so. Downing's research placed responsibility with the David Crockett Memorial Association of Gibson County. The Association was the body legally or formally responsible, but probably the work was in reality done by Rutherford Lions Club members.
6. Culp to Downing, March 16, 1978, letter in Downing's possession.
7. Senator Albert Gore to Broeck Cummings, February, 24, 1967, Cummings Papers, Rutherford Lions Club.
8. Interestingly, in the Appendix under "*Gibson's Representatives in United States Congress*," Culp and Ross listed the official political residence for Davy's incumbencies as Trenton, Gibson County, Tennessee. Culp and Ross, **Gibson County**, 574.
9. Trenton **Herald-Register**, August 16, 1967.
10. Culp's article does not indicate whether Rudd was a Crockett descendant, nor does he indicate any other basis for Rudd's interest in Crockett but personal curiosity. In the process of research in the mid-1970s this author talked with W.G. Rudd, who lives south of Martin, Tennessee, on Highway 45E—often called the Sharon Highway—at Rudd's Crossing. Mr. Rudd is a Crockett descendant who put the author into contact with Mr. and Mrs. R. ("Buck") Simmons, both of whom are Crockett descendants. This author wondered about the similarity between Smith Rudd's name and that of W.G. Rudd and whether the Michigan man may also have been related to Davy. (Downing, "*Crockett*;" French and Armstrong do not mention the Rudd name in the index to their volume.)
11. French and Armstrong, **Crockett Family**, 345.
12. Portions of this letter can easily be regarded as promotional or settlement literature because they speak of the Texas climate and soil in most complimentary, perhaps even utopian terms.
13. To this author's knowledge this is the only reference to the cabin's not being on the original site. Professor Charles Ogilvie, a colleague who has focused his research upon architectural and social history in West Tennessee, says it was not unusual for small cabins to be skidded across frozen ground, but it was necessary to dismantle the large cabins for moving.
14. Trenton **Herald-Register**, August 23, 1967.

